Books by K. A. Nuzum



The Leanin' Dog

Tr 978-0-06-113934-5 • \$15.99 (\$17.25) Lb 978-0-06-113935-2 • \$16.89 (\$17.89)

This heartwarming, heartbreaking novel is the story of a girl, a dog, and the friendship that saves them both.



A Small White Scar

Tr 978-0-06-075639-0 • \$15.99 (\$18.99) Lb 978-0-06-075640-6 • \$16.89 (\$19.89) Pb 978-0-06-075641-3 • \$6.99 (\$7.50)

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 —School Library Journal (starred review)
- ALA Booklist "Top 10 First Novels"
- ALA Booklist Editors' Choice
- New York Public Library Books for the Teen Age



About the Author

K. A. Nuzum had early careers first as a ballroom dancer and then as an advanced master gardener and gardening radio-show host before earning her MFA in writing for children and young adults from Vermont College. She lives on a small farm in eastern Colorado with her husband, two sons, and a menagerie of animals that includes five dogs, three horses, three cats, one potbellied pig, three chickens, one gerbil, one hamster, one rabbit, and a tank of tropical fish.



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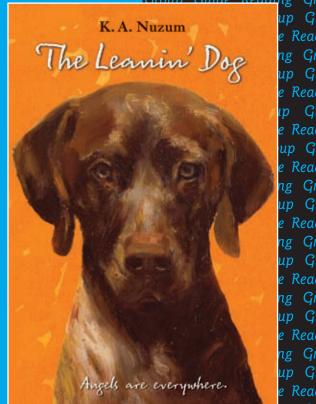
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Questions and activities prepared by Susan Geye, Library Media Specialist, Fort Worth, Texas. Reading Group Guide Rea

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The Leanin' Dog

By K. A. Nuzum

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About the Book

In the snow-covered Colorado mountains, it's coming on Christmas. But eleven-year-old Dessa Dean has just about given up on ever being happy again. Her hardworking father can't possibly fill the huge hole in her heart that her mother's death has left. But then, when hope has just about run out, a dog—huge and fudge-colored from head to toe—bounds into Dessa's life, leading both her and her father back to the love and contentment that they thought they would never regain.

Discussion Questions

- **I.** Why does Dessa Dean feel so much shame? Are her reasons legitimate? Why or why not?
- **2.** Dessa Dean worries: "Deep down inside I held a fear that I was daft" (page 18). Why is her fear unfounded? Why is she finally able to overcome her fear?
- 3. How does the way her mother died affect Dessa Dean? How does she deal with the tragedy of her mother's death?
- **4.** What happens when Dessa Dean summons her stubborn streak? How does this stubborn streak help her endure living without her mother?
- 5. Dessa Dean's life might seem mundane in comparison to life in the twenty-first century. How would the story be different if it took place today? Would a twenty-first century eleven-year-old have the ability to do all that Dessa Dean did? Why or why not?
- **6.** Why is Dessa Dean's father more than patient with the dog's bad behavior, the cost of food, and the use of additional firewood in a time when there is so little for him and Dessa Dean? What does this say about him as a father?
- 7. The Leanin' Dog represents hope to Dessa Dean and her father. What does Dessa Dean hope for? What does her father hope for? Do either of them realize their dreams?

- **8.** Dessa Dean continually finds bits and pieces of her mother: the Christmas stars and the Advent calendar, the chocolate for the fudge, the book *The Arabian Nights*, and the wonderful lessons about math and cooking. How do these memories bring comfort to Dessa Dean? How does her father's silence make the healing process difficult for her?
- **9.** On page 152, Dessa Dean's father apologizes to her, and his apology unsettles her. Why does he apologize? Why is Dessa Dean so taken aback by his apology? How does this mark a change in their relationship?
- **10.** How does the cold weather act as a character in the novel? How does the cold affect every other character, including the bear?
- **11.** All three main characters—Dessa Dean, her father, and the Leanin' Dog—are doing their best to survive the hand God dealt them. How is their survival made easier by becoming a family? What does each contribute so that all benefit?
- **12.** Christmas dinner on Willow Creek with her father and the Leanin' Dog is just the celebration Dessa Dean needs. Why is her Christmas present so special?
- **13.** Eventually, Dessa Dean reclaims her life after her mother's death. What events lead up to her healing?
- **14.** Why does Dessa Dean eventually settle on the name Leanin' Dog? Do you think it's the right name for the dog? Why or why not?

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Extension Activities

Angels Everywhere. Dessa Dean loves the Christmas angel that her father carved for her mother, and the realization that the face on the angel is her mother's makes the angel that much more precious to her. How does the Leanin' Dog also become an angel to Dessa Dean and her father? Write about an angel in your life who has helped you through a difficult time. Share your story with others in your group.

Comic Relief. *The Leanin' Dog* contains no illustrations, but the author has painted vivid pictures with her words. Find a passage that describes the woods around Dessa Dean's house, the Leanin' Dog, or a memorable event and illustrate the passage in cartoon or comic-book style using pen or pencil.

Play with Words. K. A. Nuzum uses idioms throughout her novel, including the following: "trying to get blood from a turnip" (page 133), "squeezing water from a stone" (page 133), and "making a mountain out of a molehill" (pages 150–1). Investigate the origins and meanings of these idioms. Then research the meanings of other idioms that you are familiar with and write new idioms to share with your group. Illustrate and post the new idioms in the classroom or library.

Beware Jack Frost. Dessa Dean suffers from the lasting effects of frostbite. In recent years, sensational news stories have spotlighted people who were lost on winter hiking expeditions, as well as those who were the victims of ski accidents. In incidents such as these, frostbite is always a concern. Investigate what frostbite is, how it occurs, and what lasting effects it has on a person. What is the best way to help a frostbite victim? How can one avoid becoming a victim?

A Story Within a Story. As Dessa Dean begins to open her heart to the Leanin' Dog, she reads one of the stories from *The Arabian Nights* to her new friend—a story that Dessa Dean's mother often read to her. The reading of the story comforts Dessa Dean, as it brings her closer to the Leanin' Dog and reminds her of her mother. Have students select a story or song that brings joy and contentment to them when they are troubled and share it with the class. Then schedule a class trip to share these stories and songs at the children's ward of a hospital, a nursing home, or other place that may need a cheery lift.